

# 10 things you should ask your doctor on your next visit

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/public domain

Getting in to see a doctor takes time. Getting the most out of your doctor's time takes something more: an inquisitive approach.

Armed with the right questions before you sit on the exam table, you, too, can become an empowered patient ready to make informed

decisions about your health.

"The era of the doctor who just tells you what to do - like Marcus Welby - those days are over. And they should be over," said Dr. David Hilden, an internal medicine physician at Hennepin County Medical Center. "It's good for both sides to be informed."

On average, [doctors](#) spend a mere 13 to 16 minutes per patient, according to a recent MedScape survey of more than 19,000 physicians.

To get the most out of your visit, take an active role in setting the agenda for which health issues to cover during your appointment. Focus on two or three things that you want your doctor to address, Hilden advises, and compare those with what your doctor thinks are the top issues to cover in your time together.

It also helps to prepare a list of questions ahead of time. Here are 10 to get you started:

1. Which health websites do you trust?

With so many people googling their symptoms in search of a diagnosis, it's wise to vet the information you've gleaned online with your doctor. "It's OK to say to your doc, 'I read this on WebMD. What do you think of that?'" Hilden said.

The most credible websites are the ones that are less commercial, he advised. Government sites such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) offer reliable information. In general, the best health websites are associated with a respected university or health care system.

2. What is this medication I'm taking, and why am I taking it?

It's a common problem - people come in taking 10 to 15 medications and they've lost track of what each one is for and when they were first prescribed, Hilden said. A good follow-up question is: "Are there any medications I can stop?"

If your doctor prescribes a new medication, you should ask about typical side effects and about how it will interact with your existing medications. "I wouldn't put any pill in your mouth until you know what you're taking it for, and what the common side effects are," Hilden said.

### 3. How can I get help to stop smoking?

Quitting smoking is really hard, but a brief counseling session with a doctor increases your chances of success, Hilden said.

Your doctor can steer you to helpful tools to break this unhealthy habit - and greatly impact your overall wellness. "There's almost nothing a person can do to improve health that is more important than quitting smoking," Hilden said.

### 4. Are my vaccinations and screenings up to date?

The things that keep you healthy are your vaccinations and screenings. If you're a woman, ask if you are getting appropriate breast cancer screening. Regardless of gender, ask if you should be getting a colonoscopy. Other valuable health screenings include regularly checking blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

### 5. What is a healthy weight for me, and how can I get to that?

With two-thirds of the country tipping the scales as overweight or obese, weight is a hefty health concern for most of us. But many people don't know what a good weight is for them, while others have unrealistic goals

about their weight. Getting the facts from your doctor, as well as some evidence-based tips on how to maintain a [healthy weight](#), is an important first step in reaching your weight goals.

#### 6. What do you do to stay in shape?

Some doctors are reserved in sharing information about themselves with patients, but asking what works for them in terms of eating right and exercising can yield tangible advice on how to fit fitness and nutrition into a busy schedule.

#### 7. If you're prescribed an opioid painkiller, ask: Is it really necessary, and what else can I do to relieve pain?

Despite growing awareness about the addictive powers of prescription opioid painkillers, the epidemic continues. As a result, Hilden suggests that for the vast majority of people seeking pain relief, it is best to avoid taking opioid medications altogether.

Instead, ask about other treatment options for pain relief, such as acupuncture, yoga or non-opiate pain medications. "Patients want their pain to go away. That's reasonable," Hilden said. But taking opioids, he said, is "too risky in the long run."

#### 8. What are some things I can do before my next appointment that would help my health?

This question is especially helpful if you regularly see your doctor for chronic diseases. For a patient with Type 2 diabetes, for instance, a short-term goal might be to reduce blood sugar levels by one percentage point before the next doctor's visit.

#### 9. If a doctor orders a test, ask: What is it for? What are you looking

for?

Asking these questions can spark a more thoughtful discussion about your symptoms and include you in the decisionmaking process, Hilden said. On a related note, it's also OK to ask your doctor how much the test costs.

10. If your doctor recommends a particular treatment, ask: What are some alternative treatments?

In some cases, there are several treatment options, and patients who are aware of them, as well as of the risks and chances of success, are in the best position to be satisfied with their treatment decision. For instance, if you have a sore knee, there are a half-dozen things you can try, Hilden said.

A good doctor will not become defensive if you ask about options and will welcome your questions and the chance to discuss your [health](#) with you, Hilden said.

"You need a doctor who you trust to be a partner to help you make decisions that are best for you," he said. "Doctors are experts and you do need to tap into that expertise. But you want them to be open to consider what the other things we can do are."

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